STUDY OF THE OSIREION AT ABYDOS

CODE BOOK AND SOURCE DOCUMENT FOR THE BIRTH HOUSE OF ISIS

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This is by far the most comprehensive study of the subterranean structure known as the Osireion, its relation to the main temple complex of Seti I, and surrounding sacred landscape at Abydos. The Osireion contains an enormous wealth of information with its encyclopedic array of New Kingdom Underworld Books and provides a unique insight into the ancient Egyptian worldview, circa 1300 B.C. at the beginning of the Nineteenth Dynasty, following the Amarna Heresy.

It seems it was built by Seti I as part of his program of *wḥm mswt* to re-establish the abode of Osiris, abolished by the heretic Akhenaten, thus explaining its form as a subterranean architectural rendition of the *ḏuat* itself, the realm of Osiris as Ruler of the West. Built on the same axis as Seti's Mansion of Millions of Years, it was from the beginning to have been an integral part of this complex. Its ancient name, "Benefical [*ꜣḫ*] is Menmaatre for Osiris", points to its purpose. Two graffiti from the 21st and 22nd Dynasties in the Entrance Passage provide further insights as to how the ancient Egyptian priests perceived this unique structure, calling it "the mysterious/hidden place of the *ḏuat* of Menmaatre" and in a greeting "Hail to you! Isis in the birth house". The *ḏuat* and the birth house of Isis accurately describe key aspects of the Osireion's functions.

A detailed examination and analysis of the Underworld Books and their interaction with the chapters from the Book of the Dead in the Osireion show not only that they constitute three distinct ritual cycles to be enacted at different times throughout the year, but also that the king, the living Horus, as chief ritualist is prominently depicted performing these rites. This differs from the royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings, which served a somewhat different function than that of the Osireion. There the deceased king is in the main depicted as the recipient and beneficiary of the offerings and the rituals, in contrast to the Osireion, where the living king is everywhere depicted performing the rituals for the benefit of the gods. The royal tomb, in essence, is a place to house, conceal and protect the transfigured mummified king as Osiris and for his participation in the netherworld mysteries. In the Osireion this is also vitally important, but not its main function. It housed the birth house of Isis, the Central Hall, which is unique to the Osireion. It is this feature that distinguishes it from the royal tombs. The rejuvenation of Osiris, the deceased king, was crucial but here so that Isis could conceive Horus, which was to have been the main event of the third ritual cycle. With Horus' conception so too was divine kingship conceived, marking the beginning of dynastic rule in Egypt and, equally important, the legitimate means for the transfer of royal power, which had been abandoned by Akhenaten. As will be clearly demonstrated, this subterranean temple is, in fact, an elaborate cult center for Osiris focusing on his vital role in the nightly rejuvenation of the sun god, the monthly regeneration of the moon, and the conception of divine kingship both in *ḏt*-time on the first occasion and in *nḥḥ*-time with its periodic requirement for renewal to reaffirm its legitimacy and right to exist.

In the vast subterranean part of the Osireion complex, much of the decoration still remains and was published by the Egypt Exploration Society (EES) in 1904 and 1933. In addition, their extensive collection of EES negatives and notebooks documenting the excavation of the Osireion were consulted. With the existing traces of texts recorded, a significant portion can be and has been reliably restored. Still a sizable amount of the decoration has regrettably vanished over time. It should be stressed, however, that enough remains so that all three ritual cycles can be clearly identified as well as verified with what still exists, which in my opinion is critical to the validity of this study. Furthermore, with my discovery that the decoration program of the Osireion served as the template for the tomb of Ramesses VI, most of the missing material particularly from the quarried ceilings and the destroyed First Transverse Hall can now be plausibly restored. This recognition allowed for a more comprehensive analysis of and confidence in the proposed reconstruction of the missing decoration in the Osireion.

However, for those who think it preferable to exclude reconstructions and all discussion of a speculative nature from the commentaries, you need only to skip those portions of my commentaries. The recorded material is more than sufficient to allow for an accurate determination of the three ritual cycles. It will also become clear from the analysis presented that the reconstructions do serve to enhance and enrich a deeper understanding of those ritual cycles and the functions of the Osireion.

The building of the Osireion, which was a monumental undertaking, did not just happen. It was a direct result of the events that transpired in the decades before its construction, triggered by the Amarna Heresy. The events of this period were among the most tumultuous of pharaonic Egypt's long history and are outlined in the first chapter to provide a historical perspective on this unique and intriguing structure. To facilitate the understanding of the massive assemblage of sacred knowledge in the Osireion, the study is organized into the three ritual cycles, which they constitute. Following the historical perspective and a description of the Osireion in the second chapter, each of the three ritual cycles is analyzed in detail. Chapter three examines the nightly journey of the sun god. It is the shortest and easiest of the three ritual cycles to comprehend. The second ritual cycle, the monthly rites for the New Moon i.e. the Blacked-out Moon, lasting for two nights is obscure and thus considerably more difficult to understand. It is the subject of chapter four. The third ritual cycle, which is the most extensive is analyzed in chapter five – the Osiris Mysteries and the Conception of Horus. It concerns the conception of divine kingship both in *ḏt*-time on the first occasion and in *nḥḥ*-time with its periodic requirement for renewal. This annual event formed a part of the ceremonies celebrating the coronation of the king with key events taking place in the Osireion on the night of I *prt* 1, the Second New Year's Day. The final chapter is a discussion of the largely destroyed Sacred Precinct above the subterranean Osireion, but is of considerable importance to the complex as a whole. It was called the Fortress of Menmaatre and was designed such that it made important links not only to the greater Abydene sacred landscape and that of the ancestor kings, but also to the celestial dome overhead with particular reference to the movements of the constellation Orion, the stellar manifestation of Osiris.

As a sidebar to this study, but of major importance it is demonstrated, that at least in the case of the Osireion and Seti's Mansion of Millions of Years, number symbolism was already extensively in use during the early Nineteenth Dynasty. I have found it to be a useful additional tool to help penetrate and identify some of the underlying meanings encoded in the Underworld Books and even the complex chapters used from the Book of the Dead. From the numerous examples that I have included in this study, it would appear that the ancient Egyptians were using number symbolism as an organizing principle, both for the structure of a text or group of texts and to articulate the meaning behind some of the many obscure groupings of divinities within a composition, viewing abstract numbers as meaningful patterns reflecting divine planning and cosmic harmony.

The three appendixes provide important supporting information used in this study for the reconstruction and analysis of the decoration program. Appendix A shows that the decoration program of the Osireion was in fact the template for that of the tomb of Ramesses VI (KV 9). This is an important discovery for the understanding of the history of Ramesside tombs in the Valley of the Kings, pointing now to the overwhelming influence that the works of Seti I had on their decoration. It also proved invaluable for creating a reliable reconstruction for the lost portions of the decoration of the Osireion. Appendix B is included to show how the ancient Egyptians may have been able to determine the important 19 year lunar cycle, known as the Metonic cycle, on a purely observational basis without benefit of or need for complex mathematics and astronomical instrumentation. There is plenty of examples encoded in the ancient Egyptian Underworld Books and Books of the Sky that this cycle was known and recorded long before Meton (fifth century BC) ever lived. It also forms part of the detailed discussion in Appendix C on ancient Egyptian lunar number symbolism.